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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the structure and ideology of a post-doctoral training program for women and minorities in educational research is described. The program was originally designed following the mentoring model current in social science and feminist literature in the mid-1970s. With experience, however, the program co-directors found that the mentor relationship did not allow for the mutual teaching and learning essential in a new field and that the relationship too often simply replicated the hierarchy characteristic of the traditional and patriarchal research university. Proposed in its place is a program modeled on the collective work and cooperative ideals of feminist theory. (Author/GK)

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TRAINING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY RESEARCHERS:

SOME SOBERED THOUGHTS ON MENTORING,

SOME OPTIMISTIC THOUGHTS ON COMMUNITY

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, Massachusetts
April 7-11, 1980

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Training Educational Opportunity Researchers:

Some Sobered Thoughts on Mentoring,

Some Optimistic Thoughts on Community

More than three years after the Program on Women and the Department of Sociology at Northwestern first began to think about training post-doctoral researchers for new opportunities in educational research we are startled at the simplicity of our original ideas about how our goals would be achieved. But we must also celebrate the learning that has taken place among all concerned in the actual realization of a community of feminist scholars. Our naivete in those early months deserves attention because it derived so much from an easy sense that a new model for adult learning and advanced research had been successfully created in the theoretical literature. And our successes as we enter the last quarter of our second year demand attention for what they show us about the tasks ahead.

That all sounds a bit abstract and not a little dull. Perhaps I will make my point concisely by saying I had thought simply to call this paper "Beyond Mentoring."

One of the most remarkable recent phenomena in educational and feminist circles has been the rapid success of the "mentoring" construct (itself a special case of the much abused and media-current "network" boomlet). It all seemed so straight forward at the time. First, we knew from our own experiences that formal organizational structures told us very little about the way the world really works. Then we

agreed that informal relations, networks of personal acquaintanceships, and a hierarchical world molded of "insiders" and "outsiders" more correctly represented our actual experience. This was especially true, I would add, of academics in university settings, for we were socialized and came to maturity in institutions especially notable for their Byzantine structures and bureaucratic sloppiness. Where better would our new theories apply? Finally, we agreed that the way to succeed in such a world was through the advice and timely aid of sympathetic and senior insiders, those who had survived the system and in so doing had come to understand its ins and outs.

Like all really important discoveries in the social sciences, the mentor/network model dazzled us with its self-evident truthfulness. Why hadn't we all seen it before when it was right in front of our noses?

Feminists, of course, were especially quick to apply these new theories to our professional circumstances. As outsiders in most public institutions, women were especially able to see the importance of experienced mentors. How else but mentors and networks to explain our discomfort and bafflement in graduate school when we did hard work (and turned our papers in on time) while less able (and tardier) males shot ahead in our department's ranking system? Then too, the emphasis on cooperativeness inherent in the mentor relationship accords precisely with the feminist rejection of male-oriented competitive individualism.

Bari Watkins
Program on Women

It seemed perfectly right, then, to structure our post-doctoral training program on a mentorship model. We intended to bring two specific groups to Northwestern. The first was women and minority scholars with backgrounds in education needing advanced training in current social science research methods and a year of experience to advance up the career ladder. The second group included those with backgrounds in social science outside the field of education, needing greater familiarity with educational research techniques and paradigms and entree to the educational research profession. In each case,we intended two consequences: more and better educational research on issues of concern to women and minorities and the advancement of more women and minorities within the educational research profession.

We concluded, too, that a mentor relationship with a distinguished and well-connected member of the faculty would be the best means of advancing our goals. Those from education could learn from the most sophisticated social scientists on campus, learn new skills enriching their research capabilities and be led through the professional maze to good opportunities and wise career choices. Those skilled in social science research techniques would learn to apply them to new fields in education and be helped up the professional ladder the AERA represents.

In part, of course, that is exactly what has happened. Several of our past and current post-docs have followed essentially the career path described above. One example should suffice. A first cohort post-doc was originally trained as a philosopher, specializing in American philosophy and author of a very fine book on William James.

But as a woman philosopher, with family obligations limiting her geographical mobility, and in a relatively unpopular specialty within her profession, she was essentially unemployable. She quickly learned some new techniques in field research and symbolic interaction from a fine mentor figure, and applied them imaginatively to what is essentially a question in philosophy and the sociology of professions. Why, she asked, do some faculty members call women's studies "not serious"? What do they mean by that? What are the consequences? And why does that response occur much more frequently in some disciplines than others?

Her answers are fascinating and important. But I will skip over them now to let you know the career results: several publications, participation in an important international conference (which got her picture in Ms.), and a tenure-track job in a fine university with a joint appointment in philosophy and women's studies. That is exactly how things were supposed to work.

For the most part, however, we found quite a different experience, one revealing some of the everyday problems embedded in the mentorship model.

Quite some time ago, Margaret Mead described two kinds of society, those where social change may be measured by the new experiences of the child, and those where change is so rapid that parents must actively learn from their children. They may not stand still. I submit that educational research, especially that focused on women and minorities, belongs essentially to the latter. The world the field explores, attempts to predict, and tries hard to control, is changing so fast that experience becomes obsolete almost as soon as it is born. And

that situation means we must often replace the mentorship relationship with collegial cooperativeness, where one individual can be at different times mentor or learner to others, sharing acquired knowledge in the morning, eagerly learning in the afternoon. That sort of protean cooperation, we have learned from experience, not only moves individuals up the career ladder, but also changes for the better the contours of professional experience.

Acquired in everyday experience of success and failure, these claims seem to be susceptible to analysis. First, consider in its simplistic form the mentor's intellectual role: to teach a student to find her or his way among conflicting paradigms and methods, helping to locate the most productive ideas and methods to approach a given problem. There is a bit of the intellectual delicatessen about all this, an assumption that the right methods and paradigms exist, waiting only for guided discovery.

Yet the great lesson of feminist scholarship has been the necessity of deconstruction and reconstruction of theory, rather than selection. Over the past ten years we have come to see that virtually all academic paradigms, even those seemingly most benign, are culturally loaded toward white male patriarchy. Every academic field has seen the same phenomenon. Feminist scholars first attempted to consider women's lives and perceptions with existing male-dominated research methods and paradigms. This Catherine Stimpson has labelled "compensatory" scholarship. But it soon became clear that such attempts were futile. Established practice itself was not, as we had long been taught, value-free or neutral. Rather, it systematically denied or devalued women's experience, making it invisible and unknowable. It was necessary to reconstruct, to begin again, in order adequately

to consider what had been hidden from view. Academic research had to be reborn, in new ideas and fresh perspectives, to be useful at all.

I have drawn my example from feminist scholarship, for it is that arena I know best. But if our co-director, James Pitts, were illustrating the same point he would be equally able to describe deconstruction as the task of research on ethnic and racial minorities. There too, white patriarchy had defined what was to be known as well as who was to know it, and the exclusion of minorities from intellectual life meant that their experiences could not be considered at all.

Certainly such a need for reconstruction in theory permeates education research. We have certainly encountered that situation regularly in the work our post-docs have done and in the projects we have accomplished together. During 1979-80, for example, we have all been very much excited by one of our fellow's research on the social setting of secondary school teaching. Because the research begins from the experience and perspectives of the teachers themselves, the project cannot rest on either of the existing paradigms in the field: neither macro functionalist theories of the left or right on the social meaning of education nor micro theories of classroom interaction adequately account for the teacher's perceived experience of struggle for professional autonomy within the political economy of the schools. All involved -- fellows, other faculty, and the project co-directors -- have had to relearn and rethink what we thought we knew. Each brought the experience of a

discipline to the enterprise, to teach each other, but in the end we worked together to create a new synthesis of understanding, achievable only through reconstructive cooperation and mutuality.

Or consider our current joint project of conducting an evaluation of Northwestern's new undergraduate program in Women's Studies. Conducted by two teams working alternately as field researchers and in the "quantitative" or experimental mode, the project has first dissolved the perceived antithesis of two traditions. By considering the same issues in two modes of analysis we have found enriching connections between them. Simultaneously, too, our mutual interest in the goals of feminist education allowed us to transcend the paradigmatic distinction between liberal arts and vocational education, finding in the concept of "empowerment" a unifying sense of how and why we teach. We look in our evaluation for a student's sense that her or his life choices, career plans, interpersonal interactions, and intellectual life will be infused with a sense of efficacy.

In this enterprise, too, we are all students as we are all mentors. No one of us could teach the others the model we created, for it emerged from our disparate backgrounds and their interaction. Most fascinating to me in my role as observer (and to our process evaluator, my mentor in learning how to see human interactions) was the heightened sense of creativity and power in the group as we worked together. As we taught each other to think about empowerment in feminist education, we were ourselves empowered.

The same story might be told about the form as well as the content of our post-doctoral program, bringing with it consequences for our practice of postgraduate education.

Our post-docs have, of course, come from a variety of professional experiences as well as intellectual traditions. Some have been fresh from Ph.D. programs, but those have varied from highly traditional and hierarchical to innovative and egalitarian. Others have had extensive professional experience, on college faculties, in research centers, as social activists. And of course the three of us to have been associated with the project as directors also come from different worlds and different generations. My own professional mentor, the primary force behind our original proposal, reminds me of the differences between her generation of woman scholars and my own. Because I am a historian, I try to enrich her sociological understanding of the reasons for that difference. Our current co-director, a black male, lets us know about the male professional culture he inhabits, but his perspectives on it are especially acute because his blackness makes him in part an outsider.

My point should be clear. Because we are a project conceived by women and minority academics, operating as a community of scholars sharing experience and alternating roles of teacher and learner, we share an ideal of a cooperative university, as concerned with process as with products, more determined to reconstruct paradigms than simply to adapt to them. And that mode of operation is at base antithetical to the modern research university, based on a hierarchical bureaucracy, favoring individaul and measurable reserach products over learning, and surviving only as it exploits the powerless at the bottom of the pyramid.

Such a situation is, I believe, necessary for all new modes of social research, but especially appropriate and desirable for an educational research project for women and minorities. We do not need to be learners only, initiated into a professional world by a mentor who

can serve only as a guide to the old. Rather, in our intellectual constructs and professional behavior we all need to be at once guides, explorers, and visionaries, helping each other through circumstances when we can but rebuilding the world as we go. If not, then we merely replicate the world which has injured us, allowing for the continued marginality rather than centrality of the people, interests,and beliefs that made us what we are.